The Efficacy of Various Kinds of Error Feedback on Improving Writing Accuracy of EFL Learners

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The present study was an attempt to delve further into the effects of different corrective feedback strategies on enhancing learners' writing accuracy both short and long term. To fulfill the purpose of the study, three classes comprising 67 female students in the context of a public high school in Astara, Iran, were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions; direct feedback with teacher-student 5 minute individual conference; indirect coded feedback and no-feedback. A pre-test ensured that learners are homogeneous regarding their previous grammatical knowledge. The study lasted for 5 weeks. There were immediate and delayed posttests to measure the writing accuracy of learners both short and long term. The results of the short-term test showed the significant superiority of direct feedback in the teacher-student individual conference group over the other groups. In contrast, the learners in the indirect coded feedback group were slightly better than the group that received instruction through direct and teacher-student conference feedback. This suggests that it is beneficial to make use of direct corrective feedback strategies when the short period mastery of the linguistic structures is needed and indirect corrective strategies are proposed when long-term mastery of the grammatical knowledge is the purpose of the educational intervention.

Introduction

A key issue of interest to both researchers and teachers in second language writing is how teachers correct students' writing. The role played by corrective feedback in language acquisition has been highly controversial. On the one hand, some believe that corrective feedback is a highly effective means for improving learners' acquisition process because it helps learners to match their utterances with target language models and increases their attention to structures that have not been acquired before and consequently, it can be the initiation of learning process (e.g. White, 1991). On the other hand, other theorists maintain that primary linguistic input is needed for triggering the learning process rather than corrective feedback (cf. Schwartz, 1993) and some go so far as to recommend abandoning corrective feedback in the classroom setting entirely (e.g. Truscott, 1999). However, as the literature

review in the next section indicates, there are still no clear answers to the questions researchers have addressed. Given that ambiguity, this study aims to compare three groups: two which receive different corrective feedback strategies and one control group that receives no feedback. The recipient feedback groups get written, explicit grammar together with teacher-student individual conference, indirect coded feedback. Thus this study looks at whether these types of feedback, as well as no-feedback have an effect on students' writing accuracy in both short-term and long-term intervals.

To this end, this paper will begin with a look at some ways in which error feedback has been defined, followed by a brief overview of some previous studies into error feedback concerning the role it plays in language acquisition as well as the more narrow area of accuracy in learning to write in a second language. The study context is then described, followed by the study results and discussion.

Definitions of Error Feedback

In the literature of second language acquisition, various terms have been used for the process of recognizing errors and providing feedback. According to Chaudron (1988), the term corrective feedback incorporates different levels of meaning. This author holds that the term "treatment of error" refers to "any teacher behavior following an error that minimally attempts to inform the learner of the fact of error" (p. 150). In Schachter's view, three terms; corrective feedback, negative evidence, and negative feedback are respectively used in the fields of language teaching, language acquisition, and cognitive psychology. Schachter (1991) postulated that generally there are two kinds of feedback; explicit feedback such as grammatical explanation, or overt error correction and implicit feedback such as confirmation checks, repetition, recasts, facial expressions, clarification requests and silence. Lightbown and Spada (1999) define corrective feedback as:

> Any indication to the learners that their use of the target language is incorrect. This includes various responses that the learners receive. When a language learner says, 'He go to school everyday', corrective feedback can be explicit, for example, 'no, you should say goes, not go' or implicit 'yes he goes to school every day', and may or may not include metalinguistic information, for example, 'Don't forget to make the verb agree with the subject'. (p. 171-172)

Long's (1996) definition of feedback is more comprehensive in general. According to Long, environmental input is provided in two categories to the learners; positive evidence and negative evidence. In positive evidence type, some acceptable and grammatical models in target language are introduced to the learners; while negative evidence provides learners with direct or indirect information about what is unacceptable. This information may be:

> Explicit (e.g., grammatical explanation or overt error correction) or implicit (e.g., failure to understand, incidental error correction in a response, such as a confirmation check, which reformulates the learners' utterance without interrupting the flow of the conversation—in which case, the negative feedback simultaneously provides additional positive evidence—and perhaps also the absence of the items in the input. (Long, 1996, p. 413)

Along with varying definitions of error feedback, some main strategies used by teachers in reacting to students' errors have been identified. Following Ellis' (2009) classification, teachers use *direct and indirect error feedback.* In the case of writing correction, direct error feedback or overt correction is provided when the teacher writes the correct form in students' papers while in the latter, the teacher just indicates indirectly the location of the error. The indirect corrective feedback can be categorized into indicating along with locating the error and indicating only types. Ferris & Roberts (2001) defined directive feedback as the corrections made by the teacher and indirect feedback as the indications made by the teacher by underlying or providing codes. There has also be some distinction made concerning the focus of the feedback, which relates to whether the teacher focuses on all or most of the students' errors or acts selectively by focusing on some specific types of errors. The teacher may provide a) unfocused corrective feedback with extensive correction or b) focused corrective feedback with intensive correction.

In this study, the definition that most closely represents the type of feedback used by the researcher are those defined by Ellis (2009) and Ferris and Roberts (2001). Thus, in this article, corrective feedback is understood as the combination of direct explicit written corrective feedback (errors indicated by symbols taught at the beginning of the study) and indirect feedback (as is the case of a teacher-student conference).

The role of corrective feedback in second language acquisition

Since Truscott's published article in 1996, ''the case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes,'' there has been considerable debate among teachers and researchers on whether and how to give L2 students feedback on their grammatical errors (Ferris, 2002, 2004; Truscott, 1996, 1999). Truscott (1996) stated that grammar correction should be abandoned and that it has no place in writing courses. By analyzing Kepner (1991), Semke (1984) and Sheppard's (1992) studies, he came to the conclusion that there is no convincing evidence to show that error correction improves the accuracy of learners' writing. He based his conclusions on two major reasons: firstly, error correction overlooks the gradual and complicated process of acquisition and secondly, he manifested some practical problems related to the ability and willingness of both teachers and students in giving and receiving error correction respectively.

In contrast, Ferris (2002) suggests that students "need distinct and additional intervention from their writing teachers to make up their deficits and develop strategies for finding, correcting, and avoiding errors" (p. 4). However, according to nativist theory, since negative evidence changes only the language behavior of the learners not their interlanguage grammar (IL); therefore, negative feedback hardly plays any role in language acquisition. In this view, positive linguistic evidence is the only reason for changes in IL grammar (Carroll, 1996; Schwartz, 1993), supporting the argument that if feedback is to be given, it should focus on positive aspects.

Along the lines of Truscott, in Krashen's view (1982, 1985), the combination of implicit process and reception of comprehensible input is the basis for second language acquisition. So, explicit feedback, both in the form of negative evidence and positive evidence barely has effect on second language acquisition whereas, some researchers such as (Ellis, 1991; Gass, 1988, 1990; Schmidt, 1990) argued that while input comprehension is needed for language acquisition, noticing is also indispensable for acquiring second language. The noticing hypothesis is based on the fact that some degree of noticing is essential in order for input to become intake and what triggers the learners' noticing of gaps between IL and the target language is the corrective feedback.

Other researchers have connected the noticing hypothesis with error correction. Bitchener and Knoch (2010) stated that "learners who notice the difference between target-like input (be it oral or WCF [written corrective feedback]) and their non-target-like output are able to modify it as target like output" (p. 194). Gass (1988, 1990) also argued against the notion that just by presenting comprehensible input, learners can convert the information to intake and consequently to output. According to this author, both comprehending the input and noticing the mismatches between their own language system and the input are necessary for learners to internalize the input. She claims that subliminal language learning is impossible, and that intake is what learners consciously notice. According to Gass, corrective feedback acts as an attention getting device and fossilization might occur without it. Ohta (2001) by moving a step further claims that providing corrective feedback helps learners to compare their production with that of others and facilitate L2 development. Finally, Schachter (1991), states that by receiving corrective feedback, learners abandon their wrong hypotheses and formulate new ones.

As these studies show, there is still considerable contradiction among scholars on the positive role of error feedback on improving learners' second language acquisition. On that account, this study endeavours to determine to what extent different types of feedback, i.e. explicit direct corrective feedback along with a teacher-student conference or indirect corrective feedback influence students' language learning.

Empirical evidences on whether error correction improves accuracy

A much-debated pedagogical issues in second language writing deals with identifying the most effective strategy to react to learners' errors. A bulk of studies has been done on investigating different corrective feedback types on improving learners' accuracy in writing. These studies have taken several different foci: to provide feedback or not, to provide feedback to all kinds of errors or just focus on some specific types of errors and to provide direct or indirect feedback.

As it has been mentioned above, various number of studies have tried to investigate the effectiveness of writing corrective feedback on students' writing, but the results remain inconclusive (Abedi, Latifi & Moinzadeh, 2010; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Liu, 2008; Soori & Samad, 2011; Truscott, 2007). On the one hand,

researchers such as (Truscott, 2007; Truscott & Hsu, 2008) believe that corrective feedback is not only unhelpful but also harmful to learners. On the other hand, Ferris (2004, 2006) and Sheen (2007) supported corrective feedback practices.

Perhaps it is not surprising that there is little agreement on the issue, given that studies comparing direct versus indirect corrective feedback often end with ambiguous results. For instance, a series of studies have come to the conclusion that correcting target English definite and indefinite articles has a positive impact on short-term and long-term improvement for both EFL and ESL language learners (Bitchener, 2008; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami & Takashima, 2008) while researchers such as Semke (1984), Vyatkina (2010), Abedi, Latifi, and Moinzadeh (2010) found no significant difference between direct vs. indirect correcting feedback. Similarly, Kepner (1991) found no difference between direct corrective feedback group and control group.

Regarding focused and unfocused corrective feedback, Rouhi and Smaiei (2010) conducted a study with three groups; focused indirect feedback (errors dealing with specific linguistic problems were underlined), unfocused indirect feedback (all linguistic errors were underlined) and a control group which did not receive any feedback. Results revealed that there was no significant difference among the three groups of the study.

Looking specifically at writing in second language learning, in a study that investigated the effectiveness of writing comments and questions rather than error correction, Semke (1984) compared 4 instructional groups; 1) writing comments and questions rather than corrections, 2) marking all errors and supplying the correct forms, 3) combining positive comments and corrections and 4) indicating errors by means of a code and requiring students to find corrections and then rewrite the assignment. The results revealed that corrections do not increase writing accuracy, fluency, or general language proficiency and they may have a negative effect on students' attitudes, especially when they were required to correct their mistakes.

In another study, Kepner (1991), compared the effects of error vs. message oriented written feedback on second language students' essays. Results showed that error corrections and rule reminders did not significantly improve students' written accuracy whereas message-related comments promoted writing proficiency.

As the above review of previous research shows, only a few number of studies have compared corrective feedback strategies versus a control group, i.e. no corrective feedback group. Moreover, unfortunately, most of the studies deal with similar correction strategies. Therefore, there is clearly a need for new studies that not only compare the effectiveness of receiving corrective feedback versus no corrective feedback but also the use of different feedback strategies. The present study aims to address that gap and add a layer to the existing studies in an EFL setting.

Research question

The aims of this study are to investigate and compare two corrective feedback strategies in different groups with one control group. The groups receive written, explicit grammar together with teacher-student individual conference and indirect coded feedback while one group get no feedback in order to see if which, if any of these strategies help improve students' writing accuracy in both short-term and long-term interval. Thus, the research question is: *To what extent does the type of corrective feedback improve the learners' accurate use of the targeted linguistic forms in both short term and long term respectively?*

Methodology

Participants and instructional setting

The present study was carried out with 67 female students in the context of a public high school in Astara, Iran. The participants were native speakers of Farsi with an average age of 16.5. Three whole classes were chosen randomly; two experimental and one control group. The classes met twice a week with each class having a duration of 90 minutes. The classes contained a comparable number of students, ranging from 21 to 25.

Design

The study was an attempt to investigate differential effects of three feedback techniques on improving students' writing accuracy, both short term and long term after the experiment. Since the researcher in this study worked with whole classes and there was no randomization regarding sampling and the participants, the present study design is quasi-experimental. The three classes were randomly divided into two instructional groups and one control group. Group one received direct explicit written

corrective feedback and a 5 minute student-teacher conference. Group two received indirect coded feedback only and group three received no corrective feedback on the targeted structures.

Target structures

Simple present tense, definite articles and prepositions were chosen as the target structures of the study for two main reasons. First of all, the researchers did not intend to examine the role of corrective feedback strategies on completely new structures but whether it helps learners to gain more control over a structure that they previously were exposed to. The second reason was based on the consultation with three English teachers at the same school and also Bitchener, Young and Cameron's (2005) study in which these target structures were identified as some types of the recurring errors among the learners.

Testing Instruments

The test in the present study was deployed over three testing sessions (pretest, immediate post-test, delayed post-test). The format of all three tests was error correction. It consisted of 20 statements that contained one error relevant to the special target linguistic structure. The students were required to underline each error and then write the correct form in front of that sentence. Each stage would be awarded half mark. Therefore, the full mark for each test was 20. It should be mentioned that each test contained totally different questions compared to the previous tests.

Pre-test

As mentioned before, the selected target structure was not new to the learners. So, to ensure that a balance existed among the learners, i.e. the students from all three groups had mastered the grammatical knowledge to a similar degree, a pre-test was administered one week before starting the study.

Procedure

In order to assure the homogeneity of the subjects, one week before starting the study a pre-test was used. Three classes were randomly chosen for the experiment. Group one received direct, explicit written corrective feedback and a 5 minute student-teacher conference. The conference was a chance for group one to ask questions about their errors and also receive additional explanations and examples if needed. In the second instructional group, the students received indirect coded feedback, i.e. instead of correcting the students' writing, the teacher indicated the errors by using symbols

which students were taught at the beginning of the study. Finally the third group acted as a control group and received no feedback on the linguistic errors. In both experimental groups, the students were required to correct the errors based on the feedback they had received and write the second draft to submit it to the teacher in the following sessions.

The entire study lasted for five weeks with two sessions per week. In total, the students were asked to hand in 9 compositions. Each piece of writing was supposed to be around 100 to 120 words. The immediate post-test started immediately in week 5 and the delayed post-test was carried out 2 weeks after finishing the study.

Data Analysis

To investigate the effectiveness of different corrective feedback strategies on short-term and long-term improvement of learners' writing, the results of the tests were calculated quantitatively. A half point for indicating the wrong use of the target linguistic item and a half point for providing the correct answer were used in all three test questions. In order to assess and guarantee the homogeneity of the learners, a pre-test was administered and the scores were put into a one-way ANOVA. Moreover, to examine the impact of corrective feedback strategies, a one-way ANOVA was used again. Additionally, if a test revealed statistical significance, post hoc tests to evaluate differences among specific means were also conducted.

Results

This section deals with the presentation of different types of corrective feedback strategies on enhancing the accuracy of learners' writing both in short and long run.

Pre-test

As was mentioned before, to ensure the homogeneity of the students regarding their previous grammatical knowledge, one week before starting the study a pre-test was administered. To see whether there is a significant difference among the mean scores, a one-way ANOVA was run. Table 1 and 2 represent descriptive and one-way ANOVA results respectively.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics: Results of the pre-test among three groups

Groups	Number	Mean	SD
Direct and teacher-student conference	24	9.46	.628
Indirect	21	10.05	.558
Control	22	9.50	.794

The results presented in Table 1 indicated that the mean scores among the three groups are quite similar (direct explicit grammar together with teacher-student conference group: 9.46; Indirect group: 10.05, Control group: 9.50). Other statistics set out in Table 2 further revealed that there is no significant difference among the three groups (F=.235, P=.792 > 0.05). Therefore, it could be claimed that all three groups have a similar starting point.

Table 2. One-way ANOVA: Results of the pre-test scores among three groups

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.694	2	2.347	.235	.792
Within Groups	640.411	64	10.006		
Total	645.104	66			

Comparing the grammatical gain in the short term (immediate post-test): Table 3 represents the means of grammatical gain taken as immediate post-test. As it is clear, the mean of group one (i.e. direct along with teacher-student conference), (17.38) is higher than that of group two (i.e. indirect), (15.14) and group three (i.e. control), (10.18).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics: Results of the immediate post-test among three groups

Groups	Number	Mean	SD
Direct and teacher-student conference	24	17.38	1.974
Indirect	21	15.14	3.054
Control	22	10.18	3.172

In order to find out about the significance of these differences, a one-way ANOVA test was run. The results are presented in table 4.

Table 4. One-way ANOVA: Results of the immediate post-test scores among three groups

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	614.949	2	307.474	40.368	.000
Within Groups	487.469	64	7.617		
Total	1102.418	66			

From the results presented in the table above, it can be construed that there is a significant difference among the groups concerning the corrective feedback strategies in immediate post-test, F (40.368), p=.00<.05. To find out where the difference lays, a Sheffe test was run whose results are presented in table 5.

Table 5. Sheffe test of differences across the groups on the immediate post-test

Grouping	Mean Difference	Sig.
Indirect **Direct & T-S Con.**	2.232[*]	.031
Control	7.193[*]	.000
Indirect Direct & T-S Con.	-2.232[*]	.031
Control	4.961[*]	.000
Control Direct & T-S Con.	-7.193[*]	.000
Indirect	-4.961*	.000

Note: Direct & T-S Con (direct and teacher-student conference)

As can be seen, the one-way ANOVA revealed that there is a significant difference among all groups. In other words, the students in group one did significantly better than the other groups. Similarly, students in group two outperformed learners in group three. This means that in terms of effectiveness, direct explicit corrective feedback together with teacher-student conference was number one and indirect corrective feedback was number two in bringing about improvement.

Comparing the grammatical gain in the long-term (delayed post-test): Table 6 represents the means of the grammatical gain among the three groups concerning the long-term post-test.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics: Results of the long-term post-test among three groups

Groups	Number	Mean	SD
Direct and teacher-student conference	24	14.88	3.405
Indirect	21	16.14	2.007
Control	22	9.36	3.259

As can be seen in the table above, the results showed that the mean of group one (16.14) is higher than that of group two (14.88) and group three (9.36). To see

whether these differences are significant or not a one-way ANOVA was run. The results are presented in table 7.

Table 7. One-way ANOVA: Results of the long-term post-test scores among three groups

	Sum of Squares	**df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**Sig.**
Between Groups	568.369	2	284.185	31.892	.000
Within Groups	570.287	64	8.911		
Total	1138.657	66			

The presented results show that thare is a significant discrepancy among the groups. Again to find out where the differencse lie, a Sheffe test was run and the results are presented in table 8.

Table 8. Sheffe test of differences across the groups on the immediate post-test

Grouping	**Mean Difference**	**Sig.**
Direct & T-S Con. Indirect	-1.268	.370
Control	5.511*	.000
Indirect T-S Con. & Direct	1.268	.370
Control	6.779*	.000
Control T-S Con. & Direct	-5.511*	.000
Indirect	-6.779*	.000

Concerning delayed post-test results, as is clear from the table above, the results of the Sheffe test show that although there is a mean difference between group one and two, this difference is not significant (p= .370>.05). In other words, students in the indirect coded group performed slightly better than the students in the direct corrective feedback together with teacher-student conference group but not significantly. However, there is a significant difference between the learners in group one and control groups and similarly between the students in group two and the control group.

Discussion

The main purpose of the present study was to delve further into the effects of corrective feedback strategies on enhancing Iranian students' writing accuracy. The study was conducted by comparing the effects of direct feedback together with teacher-student conference, indirect coded feedback, and no feedback conditions on learners' short and long-term performances. The results revealed that the students'

performance in teacher-student conference together with explicit written grammar group was considerably better than the others in short-term post-test. However, concerning the long-term test results, everything changed. The indirect coded group gradually decreased their number of errors during the treatment and finally they gained better results compared to the direct explicit written feedback combined with teacher-student conference group. However, the statistical comparison was not significant.

Based on the findings described above, Truscott's (1999) claim that error correction does not have a significant impact on enhancing learners' writing accuracy appears to be incorrect. The results of this study are in accord with those reported by researchers that support the use of feedback. For instance Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2003; Ferris & Helt, 2000; Fratzen, 1995; Lalande, 1982 all found that indirect coded feedback was more effective on students' long-term writing development than direct error feedback. Similarly, the results are somewhat in agreement with Erel's (2007) study in which there was not any significant difference between direct and indirect coded feedback, however, in this study the indirect coded feedback group committed fewer errors than the direct feedback group. However, the results are inconsistent with Robb, Ross and Shortreed's (1986) study in which no significant difference was found among four instructional groups; a) direct correction; b) indirect coded feedback; c) indirect highlighted feedback; and d) indirect marginal feedback. Arguably, the reason for the good performance of the indirect coded feedback learners in the delayed post-test can be explained in terms of Eliis' (2003) explanation that since the learners in the indirect coded feedback group try to find the codes and rewrite the sentences, this makes them reflect more on their papers and consequently retain the grammatical knowledge.

Some implications could also be drawn to further enhance the teaching and learning in Iranian high schools regarding the three grammatical items (and if tests are replicated in other contexts, the results can be applicable elsewhere). The fact that the effectiveness of the teacher-student conference together with explicit instruction of grammar and indirect corrective feedback varies in the short term as well as in the long run makes it difficult for us to decide which type of corrective feedback would be most beneficial for the learners. It should be noted that none of these corrective feedback strategies are claimed to be the best one. The underlying purpose of the

language learning process will determine the most suitable strategy. Nonetheless, this type of feedback has proven to be successful and could be applicable to certain situations such as whenever there is a high-level exam such as TOEFL. This study shows that making use making use of direct corrective feedback strategies in this type of conditions may be optimal since they are time saving, i.e. they cause considerable improvement in a short period of time. In contrast, the long-term mastery of the grammatical knowledge, there must be a combination of teaching strategies, including some indirect corrective feedback strategies which have been proposed here. A number of corrective strategies can be implemented in this regard, for example, students can be asked to correct their classmates' papers (peer-correction), or their own errors (self-correction) or learners can even suggest their favorite corrective feedback strategy. In this way the teacher can cater to their learners' personal needs, although this is probably only practical with a small number of students.

Conclusion

Providing effective feedback to students' writing errors has always been one of the more confusing and challenging tasks for many language teachers. This study was set up to investigate the effectiveness of different corrective feedback strategies on improving learners' writing accuracy, both short and long term. The results revealed that direct corrective feedback strategies can have a positive role on improving writing accuracy short term, while indirect corrective strategies are more effective in the long run. Teachers are recommended to find the most effective corrective feedback the students need in order to learn a foreign language. It has been discussed that there are different perspectives on the role of error feedback in second language learners' writing. This study aims to expand on the previous studies in this area in order to give further input into strategies that can enhance the learning experience.

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